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ABSTRACT

The need for a better educated work force has created a corresponding need for workplace literacy programs. A number of issues have emerged as the focus of literacy education has shifted from improving social mobility to providing employment-related literacy programs. Some of these issues are related to the need for more resources for workplace literacy programs. Several aspects of issues related to resources are: emphasis on improving the basic skills of the unemployed rather than individuals in the current work force and lack of resources that serve adequately both the general and employment-related literacy needs of all adults. Another set of issues surrounding workplace literacy programs has to do with their content or curriculum. They include determination of what skills should be taught, choice of teaching methods, and the narrow focus of many workplace literacy programs. (Thirty-one print resources provide information about workplace literacy. A listing of seven resource organizations is also provided.) (YLB)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

TRENDS AND ISSUES ALERTS

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WORKPLACE LITERACY

During the latter part of the 1980s, workplace literacy has emerged as a national priority. The impact of adult illiteracy on private industry is increasingly visible as technological advances and foreign competition raise workers' basic skill requirements. A poorly educated work force has a negative impact on economic productivity and the nation's ability to compete in world markets. Demographic factors and changes in jobs are also creating a need for workplace literacy programs. Current trends indicate that by the year 2000, it is likely that there will be more jobs than qualified people to fill them.

Many diverse strategies and programs have been implemented to address the need for a better educated work force. At the same time, a number of issues have emerged as the focus of literacy education has shifted from improving social mobility to providing employment-related literacy programs. Some of these issues are related to the need for more resources for workplace literacy programs. Because current national efforts in literacy education tend to focus on improving the basic skills of the unemployed, the poor basic skills of many individuals in the current work force have been referred to as "the most seriously neglected national problem" (Chisman 1989, p. 13).

Another aspect of issues related to resources is the concern that employment-related literacy education programs, which frequently serve adults who possess at least minimal reading and writing abilities, tend to divert scarce resources from adults who have little or no literacy skills. More resources are needed to serve adequately both the general and the employment-related literacy needs of all adults.

Another set of issues surrounding workplace literacy programs has to do with their content or curriculum. Although it appears that the types of skills needed to enter and advance in the workplace are expanding, businesses are not always clear about what specific skills are needed. Furthermore, there is no consensus on how these skills can best be taught. The narrow focus of many workplace literacy programs raises another curriculum issue. Rather than helping adults learn to read, write, solve problems, and continue learning, programs focus on training for specific tasks. However, the business community itself is divided on the extent of its obligation regarding the improvement of general literacy.

The need to improve literacy levels of workers has been the subject of national attention. As a result, a number of issues have emerged that need to be acknowledged and addressed. The resources below provide information about workplace literacy, including a discussion of related issues.

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Print Resources

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Workplace Literacy: Targeting the Future. A Report on the National Conference on Workplace Literacy. Washington, DC: Office of Advocacy, U.S. Small Business Administration, October 3-4, 1988.

Resource Organizations

AFL-CIO, Education Department, 815 16th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20006 (202/637-5144).

American Society for Training and Development, 1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313 (203/683-8100).

Business Council for Effective Literacy, 1221 Avenue of the Americas, 35th Floor, New York, NY 10020 (212/512-2415, 2412).

Education Writers Association, 1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 310, Washington, DC 20036 (202/429-9680).

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Center on Education and Training for Employment, 1900 Kenny Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1090 (800/848-4815, 614/292-4353).

National Alliance of Business, 1015 15th Street, NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20005 (202/457-0040).

International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714 (302/731-1600).

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